

THE BIRDERS

Reynald Altéma, MD

Emma Fiza Jacobsen, a graduate student in ornithology, couldn't believe her eyes as the plane took off for her maiden voyage to the Mecca of birders, the forests of Colombia. Emma and birding had a love affair from their first encounter. She was then the shy little girl in social purgatory, receiving incessant ribbings from her classmates due to her front snaggleteeth. A time when she used to suck her thumb, and her classmates bestowed the name "toothy" upon her, much to her chagrin. That nickname alternated with "wabbit," made famous by Elmer Fudd in the Bugs Bunny cartoon. This putdown made her sad, and she became withdrawn and distraught because nobody cared to play with her. She felt like an outcast.

She first realized there was a price to pay for looking different than the other students. A permanent bull's-eye came writ large on her forehead for standing out. She was the only biological child of a mixed couple, yet each parent had a child from a previous marriage. The eldest was a blond boy; the next was a Sudanese-born girl. Her father was a third-generation Dane, and her mother was from the Sudan. Her first name is common in Denmark, whereas her middle name came from her mom's Sudanese culture. The spontaneous love at home was very soothing; she learned that the inner soul, rather than the outer shell, ought to represent the essence of a person. Her family lived in a mostly Caucasian community in a Connecticut suburbia. Nonetheless, solace against the misery endured away from home during the day couldn't arrive soon enough. It came by happenstance and from the least likely place.

Her teacher once brought a National Geographic magazine that featured birds galore. The stunning display of bright hues worn by these creatures struck a chord that had yet to stop vibrating since. The kaleidoscope of tints, the magistry of a diving peregrine falcon, the fastest animal on earth, and the steadiness of a hummingbird feeding off the nectar of a flower in midair just kept her in awe. The concept and the mechanics behind the propulsion and stability of an airborne animal riveted her mind. This opened a heretofore-closed door and exposed it to a fascinating set of facts ready for discovery, easily observable. Hence, her ego moved from the pulverizing pestle of her classmates' tart tongues to the exhilaration of feel-good satisfaction as it gained more self-assurance in acquiring more knowledge.

Instead of licking her wounds or nursing hurt feelings from ostracism, she went full throttle into the world of birds. Far from a simple passive observer, she embraced the whole experience. She begged and obtained a parakeet at home, which became her burden for feeding, cleaning the cage, and making sure the bird returned to the cage after a time out of it. She started learning about birds by perusing pamphlets from the local Audubon Society. This newfound passion helped her in more ways than one. She learned about the longstanding relationship between humankind and birds. Carrier pigeons predated the regular postal service. Falconry served as a means of survival and leisure that went back centuries. In the first instance, it provided a source of nourishment as meat to its trainer after a successful hunt. In the second instance, falcon hunting rings more like a sporting event. This popular custom carries a different meaning in diverse societies like impoverished Mongolia or wealthy Qatar. Pushing this indulgence to an extreme, this wealthy nation has built falcon hospitals. She became "a guru on birds," as her siblings would say later, once she decided to be at her pet's beck and call to spark the pent-up passion bursting at the seams.

From the onset, her reading ability expanded by leaps and bounds. Listening to National Geographic videotapes about birds, while visualizing the text accelerated her language fluency. That allowed her to leapfrog her classmates. Jealousy displaced disdain as the motivation to dislike

her. Hence the heckling wouldn't stop. Therefore, she changed from a frail, fearful youngster into a tomboy able and willing to mix it up and use her brawn to fend for herself. Of course, behind her back, the same wicked tongues would label her, "lumberjack." Quite a few times, she gave a licking to her peers when she would catch them red-handed spewing such insults. She resented such negative judgment. She never harbored any desire to be manly; she was very much into girly tastes and aspirations. Albeit such minor miscues, her alpha disposition rewarded her immensely.

She learned to construct bird feeders and benefitted quite a bit from this simple food prop. It became a vantage point of attraction for birds. She would climb a tree and put a fallen birdie back into her nest. She would, at times, venture to watch birds from unusual spots. A significant milestone occurred when she received a set of binoculars as a birthday gift. Be it beginner's luck or not, she caught a not-so-common species, the [fork-tailed flycatcher](#), when she first used them. The long tail split in the middle mesmerized her, and that species reached the top spot on her favorites' list. She became inseparable from the binoculars and treated the tool with a kid's glove. Birding over the years grew into learning the different aspects of avian life: signature warbling, habitat, migrating pattern, sight identification, and, most of all, patience to wait for a good sighting. This learning process was a lifelong endeavor and a very humbling one at that. As good as her proficiency had developed in recognizing different calls, she couldn't mimic those calls well. That was a science in and of itself.

Gender determination by sight was also another mountain to climb. She could talk about and/or describe various tidbits with effusive persuasion. Ergo, the varying shades of lapis lazuli of a lazuli bunting, the vermilion plumage of an adult flycatcher, or the dazzling effect on the tints of a finch from yellow to bright red depending on the carotenoid content of its diet would be typical fare. Yet she would be hard-pressed to reproduce with her vocal cords the sonorous melodies these tiny creatures can grace us with. Be that as it may, Emma's infatuation with birds, the best example of the permutation of vibrant colors and vocal repertoire imaginable, she would readily remind one, has refined and defined her life.

Emma, as she matured, deftly mixed her feminine tendency with practical or pedestrian necessities. Hence, at ease with hiking boots and shorts or cargo pants to engage rugged terrains, she could just as easily wow in a low-cut gown as a lithe buxom. She had long ago made sure that her effete self wouldn't suffer. She had those snaggleteeth filed many moons ago and relied on avian species' natural taming of tones to improvise awe-inspiring makeups. In a maddening reality, either her sharp wit or her café au lait hue discouraged suitors. Unlike the universal attraction among humans for the variegated colors in nature, skin tones didn't benefit from such relish. Her complexion sometimes became a victim of others' racial sensibilities. Some found her too dark, while others recoiled at her lack of melanin. Not fitting into a homogeneous crowd became her bane.

Juggling her way into such a crowd had become her lifelong adaptation, just like accepting polluted air as a condition of staying alive. Such transformation has been challenging and has always been a work in progress. Fortunately, her parents have played a significant role in helping her start cleansing potential scabs off her skin. Both parents had insisted on all siblings learning about others' sensibilities.

That learning process came in several forms, reading being the first among equals. That list included quite a few books. At the top perched *The Color of Water* by James McBride, a musician who doubled as a writer. It's an autobiography chronicling the pitfalls of marrying outside one's clan. In this case, his white Jewish mother chose an African American, and her family spurned her. Since Emma's fancy entailed the visual world, she had the added duty of reading *The*

Island of the Colorblind by the late Oliver Sacks, the renowned neuroophthalmologist. The book deals with people with congenital absolute color blindness who then rely on other senses and the detection of textures and slight variations of tones. As a family, they had all watched the CBS *60 Minutes* profile on architect Chris Downey. He lost sight at age 45 and continued to design based on a new awareness of one's surroundings based on aural perceptions. She researched the topic, including the life of the famed crooner Ray Charles, who became blind in early childhood.

All this preparation took place under the tutelage of a dad who wanted a proactive disposition to face our not-so-kind world. "Humans are complicated, mirroring the complexities of our body's functions. One needs to avoid the two extremes, naiveté and cynicism, and burnish our understanding of behavior that can be unpredictable in so many ways. Be always prepared to avoid surprises," her father and mother would keep reminding her.

By choosing birding as a pastime, that recreation carried the distinction of a rarefied environment, a field barren of diversity among its aficionados. While tolerated in such circles, she has had slim pickings socially throughout the years. By a twist of events, nothing prepares one for Tantric sensations more than observation of bird behavior. The long and twisted phallus of a duck and a video of the sublime mating ritual of satin bowerbirds, endemic to Australia, influence the observer. Emma has overheard birders opine on the erotic repercussions of this act of voyeurism. The balsamic nature of watching two cooing doves is notorious. Her longstanding adventure with birds made her a perfect fit for a foray into ornithology, garnering her excellent grades. After graduating from Cornell University, which she attended on an academic scholarship, it devolved into a cinch to win a Smithsonian Fellowship and research into the avian haven on earth, Colombia. She was salivating at the treasure trove awaiting her. The planning of the trip occurred as a collaborative effort with the Smithsonian Institute. She did research that dovetailed with the institution's resources of a network of reliable agencies to guide their Fellows on foreign soil.

Emma wanted to kill many birds with one stone, no pun intended. Her research has pointed to Colombia, gifted with numerous terrains and tropical microclimates, as the ideal place. It holds the ranking of hosting the most endemic species of birds and their largest population. Its flora also deserves recognition. Many of its cities built on plateaus evinced the nexus of a cool climate, rain, and sun on the growth of flowers; Medellín reigns as the poster city of such reality. Their horticultural propensity rivals the best gardens in London. In the northern part, not far from the famed Cartagena, a sizable population of Afro-descendants had established roots and a distinct culture in the Palenque region, and she wanted to venture into that zone to see birds and local customs. The *Aviario Nacional de Colombia* ranked high on her radar.

Her itinerary would land her at the airport in Cartagena. This sea-coast city emulates the slave trade heritage: poor descendants of enslaved people at the bottom of the social ladder, providing a workforce for menial labor. A bustling town dependent on tourism with many historic edifices from the colonial era. She polished her Spanish to converse with the locals and carried a conversational booklet; a translation app added the icing on the cake. She wanted to be able to get out of any bind. While in the plane, Emma was reviewing some of the heralded species from the country, a true smorgasbord of offerings: large beaks like the toucan, the aracari, large sizes like the king vulture or the osprey; magnificent gliders like the frigatebird, the caracara; the puny American pygmy kingfisher. Of course, a wide variety of flycatchers, probably the largest in the world, exist in this part. The thought of that made her drool. High on the list of birds to see included parrots, macaws, and parakeets, to name a few. Enough to keep her busy for days on end. Finding a reliable guide would come in handy, especially for a single woman in a macho environment.

Emma's experience in Colombia became a life-changing adventure. The traveling agency provided a driver to pick her up at the airport. He was a bubbly lad, barely older than her, with typical Latin American mannerisms of hand gesturing, somewhat touchy-feely, and very talkative. He looked like a bodybuilder and kept singing along with the tunes playing on the radio. Intermittently, he would also whistle with ease and precision, reminding her of Bobby McFerrin, who epitomizes the voice as a legitimate instrument. "My name is Cholo. Are you here to admire our birds? I can definitely help with that! You will see." He said it with a good-natured smile. "I have always liked birds and have been playing with them since I was a boy. I have a way with them. You will see." He dropped her off at a hotel near the city's Old Section. Before leaving, they had this exchange haltingly, he in English and she in Spanish. "I can pick you up anytime tomorrow. Let me know. I will be your guide. I know this whole area well. I can definitely take you to Palenque, where I am from. We have lots of birds there too. You will see."

"Palenque, you said? Whoa! I do want to visit that. Come at eight and be on time."

"On time? No need to remind me of that. I am a pro! You will see."

She wasn't sure what to make of this last statement. Was it hubris mixed with bluster or a genuine offer? All the same, his liking of birds brought the bliss of fresh air. After a long flight from JFK airport, she decided to rest a bit, and she ate at the hotel's restaurant, located on its top floor, with a stunning view of the city. The food was delicious. Far from luxurious, the accommodation was adequate. The next day, Cholo came fifteen minutes before eight. His car radio played an upbeat tune, and he kept bobbing his head, snapping his fingers, singing, and whistling, a tapestry of carefree disposition à gogo.

"On time, not CP time! You see." He gleefully stated when she came down. She had spotted him from the roof where she was finishing breakfast. His good humor became contagious, like good- karma spreading. "Nothing better to start a day," she thought. His biceps bulged through his tee shirt, and his skin was lustrous. Emma caught herself paying attention to his physical attributes, a surprising departure, as she usually went for the mind first in gauging a fellow. She went sightseeing in Old Cartagena, a marvel of well-kept colonial architecture. She insisted on walking the narrow streets. She wanted to bask in the look and feel of the city and not just see it from a tourist's angle. She quickly noticed a tale of two worlds gliding past one another: a butler's in the streets and a patrician's in the stores, with strict racial demarcation. She also swooned at the sight of so many mestizos like her. She saw something new: vendors selling tropical fruits carved with designs rivaling a topiary display. She marveled at the pain of sculpting them so artfully to beckon one's taste buds into high gear. That new environment was unfamiliar. Back in the States, sanitary rules would keep them indoors, but their operation in the open air carried a verve and a pulse, adding a bit of excitement. Folks seemed more lively and far less confined.

For the well-heeled, many quaint shops offered the gamut of luxury goods. A dearth of Afro-descendants among the operators of businesses clashed with their preponderance as menial workers, ubiquitous in the streets. Her mind kept reverting to the spectrum of skin shades among the passers-by that mimicked the United Nations demonstration of her siblings. With combos playing, shops blaring Cumbia music, and its rhythmic pulse, this made for a joyful celebration of a people indulging and enjoying life, regardless of economic hardships. Cholo made a demonstration that pleased her. While taking a breather from the heat, perspiring profusely at a small, shaded square, she sat at a table and feasted on a delicious coconut ice cream; birds were flocking to him because he was imitating their calls.

By midday, she had seen enough of the Old Section to venture elsewhere. She looked at the area map and saw that San Basilio was a short distance. "One-hour tops," Cholo said. "*Vamos*

nos,” she suggested. Cholo became elated when she asked him to go there. He spontaneously started a history lesson about the whole slave revolt and their relocation into this region, akin to their maroons in the West Indies, except that their isolation remained permanent, and they developed their own language. “In the Americas, a similar cultural event happened in Belize with the *Garifuna* and in South Carolina with the *Geechee*.”

“Which university did you attend?” She inquired as he impressed her more and more.

“University? Not for people like me. Born in Palenque? Not a fat chance. We have limited opportunities. We are nonexistent. We only get support for playing in the national football team. You will see.” He remained sad for a minute and then started whistling again. This time he put on a virtuoso performance just like McFerrin did in that seminal recorded performance with Yoyo Ma, where his voice, as a separate instrument, pitted against the cello made for a beautiful aural experience. The whistling only got him started. “You should also know that our cuisine is world famous, and I venture to say the best! You will see. A cookbook is written in our language, [*Kumina ri Palenge pa tó paraje*](#). It was written by 38 cooks in my town, San Basilio, and competed against more than 15,000 recipe books submitted from 184 countries. It won a competition in Beijing in 2014 held by Gourmand Cookbook Award.” As he was riffing, Emma did a Google search and verified everything to a “t.” That book is available on the UNESCO website with translations in French and English. As a good entertainer, time seemed to have passed fast as he announced, “Here we are!”

Once she arrived at San Basilio, she entered a time-suspended world holding a loose link with the modern one. San Basilio de Palenque, a UNESCO world-heritage place with its language, Palenquera, is barely 30 miles south of Cartagena. This small agglomeration of no more than a few thousand souls resembled any small village in Africa, with domesticated goats and hogs running free and rummaging. Unstated was the fact, so commonly observed in Latin America, of government neglect of black communities, their existence nesting off the national conscience grid. She couldn’t wait to sample the gastronomic wonders whose existence she had never heard of till now.

When the car engine stopped, folks flocked to Cholo, many of them young women. Some elders came also, and it was apparent he told them he had an interested client he wanted to impress. Soon after his arrival, Cholo took Emma to the edge of the forest, and he made a special effort to show off his unique way with birds. He made no fewer than eight bird calls, and before long, birds on the branches first and then on the ground milled around him, feeding off breadcrumbs he was dispensing. Emma felt like a child at a candy store. Her beloved flycatchers in all hues and varying sizes and shapes of tails came as if greeting her on cue. One would think they had an inkling she would come to visit them from a long distance. The birds seemed to enjoy Cholo’s presence as if he had been absent for a while. Several landed on his head and forearms like pets welcoming their human friend.

The varieties of birds, species, and subspecies, as well as the evolving shades of a given species as an age-related factor, astonished her as she had never seen such numbers or such a palette at once. “Such beautiful creatures; if I can’t go to them, I must find a way to have them come to me, as you can see.” He said this with the glee and satisfaction all animal lovers can relate to. Emma admired his vocal skills, a feat she compared to the ability to make the click sounds of the Xhosa language of South Africa, whose most famous member was Madiba. That admiration is all the more warranted when one experiences the frustration of trying to make the sound. Emma shared Cholo’s enrapture with the flock of birds. She clicked many pictures. The birds were so close that she had no use for the binoculars. She and Cholo went from one feast to another. “Food

is ready,” announced a middle-aged lady in Palenquera. But it needed no translation. As they came closer, the aroma of the meals wafted through the air and created an irresistible pull that one spells “only one option.”

It didn’t take long for the feast to start after thorough hand washing. Emma had the following 3-course meal: sweet cassava mash as an appetizer, for main course Macaco fish stew with ripe plantain rice, and for dessert, coconut candy with panela (brown sugar) and pineapple. Of course, an excellent lime juice accompanied that. Emma had never experienced spices that so thoroughly titillated her taste buds or instilled such a desire to eat more. Ordinarily, she was a finicky eater, like one with a bird’s appetite. Today it reeked of gluttony out of nowhere. Cholo’s portions were quite sizable, and many times, he would repeat *delicioso*, or *sabroso*, with such a convincing mien and flattering ring that incited further indulgence and blessed or excused any excessive gratifications. In a segue, several young women came and started playing music, and of course, Cholo joined them in stepping with fleeting feet in a cadence that swirled them rhythmically and sensually. Mixing food and music retained an allure spanning large swaths of the diaspora. A conclusion she would draw again and again during her stay.

Emma immediately observed that with Cholo around, *birds and young women suddenly appear*. That reminded her of a song she used to hum as a youngster. Therein started her exploration of a foreign culture, rich in tradition, even bereft of financial success. This handsome Cholo guy began to intrigue her.

Cholo would pique anyone’s curiosity for sure. He comes across as well-informed and has an aura that exudes positive vibes. How that came about is a story in of itself, for it could have easily gone awry. Raised by his grandmother since his mom passed away during labor when he was two, he lost his father when he was twelve. Growing up in an environment with few amenities, he had to be creative and learn to use all his senses, especially his common sense, to survive and thrive. He had to learn to be in tune with his environment and carry on the traditions of his forebears. By necessity, he became handy and could fix stuff. A keen observer, he learned from others and or self-taught. He was a quick study in school and would play the wunderkind role in another environment.

He learned how to whistle at an early age and noticed that he could flawlessly imitate the birds’ callings, and he so indulged and became a bird lover. He excelled at playing the drum, the *tambor alegre*, and the *marimbula*, similar to the *marimba* of yesteryear. He learned to dance the local genre, *Champeta* (a cross of Reggaeton and modern Afrobeat), and then the national sensation, *Cumbia*. His real name is Charles Cassia. As is common in Latin American slang, a suave fellow can be called a *chulo*. This moniker comes in various flavors, but all have the underlying connotation of a debonair fellow who knows his way with the opposite sex. We have an equivalent expression, *tchoul*, with two meanings: *chulo* and underling.

His lady friends have coined the term *Cholo* to glorify his superlative talent as an accomplished *chulo*. It meant he had the gift of the gab, a smoocher par excellence, like a great kisser capable of stimulating carnal sinning. One of his friends described his talents likewise, “he evokes carnal pleasure and invokes the senses to provoke erotic cascades in the vertical as well as the horizontal positions.” Yet he had to face the brutal reality of life. With his grandmother’s health failing, he had to step up and provide financial help once he finished high school. He migrated to Cartagena to find steady employment and was lucky to land this gig with a travel agency to serve as a guide for tourists. He listened to hours of audiotapes of English conversations to become fluent. He also learned about others’ cultures. He made it his business to read about world events

and trends as much as possible. He noticed that the more he impressed the tourists, the more generous they tended to be, which suited him fine.

He had to sign a covenant not to fraternize with the tourists to avoid any legal mishap, especially with *Norteamericanos*, notorious for lawsuits. Enforcement of the rule was on the loose side. “Just avoid us any trouble,” was the running order. That left him with some latitude, but his job was always on the line in case of an infraction. He aimed to please the tourists to get nice tips and wanted to keep his job and not jeopardize it. Now and then, some young filly comes along and buffets the natural order. Somehow, he had a gut feeling that this young Emma was beginning to develop some ideas while looking at him. He would pretend not to see or hear anything and be a good professional. He needed to emphasize this word more, he decided. In the meantime, he would continue to stay in shape by lifting weights and running to stay trimmed and fit. A balm that threatened to become a bane with Emma unless handled deftly.

Emma’s world has included many academic rungs but has remained threadbare in social scores. The intrigue about Cholo was multi-dimensional. Without a doubt, he was a whiz, a plus on her radar, and very resourceful at that; no better combination to be found. This was the prominent part. His élan with women and his way of coaxing them, just like the birds, akin to a magnet, made her wonder. She had not come across a fella like this before. So far, as a guide, he was the ideal and would suit her itinerary fine. The next and grand place to visit was the *Aviario Nacional* the following day. The same scenario occurred; Cholo came well ahead of time with the same bubbling self. The ride of 51 km was another discovery into a well-maintained tropical gem on a peninsula, Barú, surrounded by pristine beaches. A nearby island of the same name holds the reputation of the jewel resort, yet a best-kept secret. The *Aviario* was as close to an enclosed bird paradise as one can imagine, with a mix of open-air and netted habitats.

Cholo and Emma found themselves in their entire comfort zone. They complemented each other. She had scientific training and could classify the birds by genus. He had the practical forte to seek and engage them in playful interchanges. A video of their interactions would amount to a collage of canvasses, one as poignant as the other. For example, a picture she captured of a Cholo dappled by the shade of the canopy serenading a scarlet ibis was worth the cover of a National Geographic or a poster she would cherish like a talisman.

Emma’s task of capturing the birds as digital images benefited from Cholo’s whistling, hissing, or any impromptu calling to achieve warbling. She could eternalize his court holding with the birds with effortless acumen and endearing exuberance. Bird watching in Cholo’s presence had the perk of augmented reality, the type of interactive activity she could only dream of. From a scientific viewpoint, she could write a paper about attracting birds by imitating their calls and using him as ironclad proof. His performance, however, went beyond just the mechanics of vocal cords virtuosity. He immersed himself in bird speak and bird bonding, with a level of emotions transcending species. That was art and not science. Passion and not duty. Reckless abandon and not just dispassionate investigation. And that was contagious.

Neither became tired of this activity. Cholo’s gig entailed self-gratification disguised as work. He was receiving money for doing something he enjoyed spending hours at. The avian milieu spread a catnip that he followed; the glee that permeated him also oozed out of his pores. Neither a decree, such natural attraction doesn’t establish, nor can a lasso catch it, bottle it, and mix it into a brew to serve and get it going. Emma and Cholo were swimming in an excess of cheerful sap that kept begetting enchantment. The kind that keeps on giving and is not associated with any hangover, but leaves bliss etched in the mind.

Now and then, this type of sap would come from the observation of an elaborate mating ritual. Cholo pointed out the famed mating dance of the [manakin](#) in different [flavors](#). Seen but not commented on and looked at with subliminal eyes—ultimately, a contagious disposition but not acknowledged spontaneously. The silence during such scenes was duplicitous; most likely, each one was wondering what the other was thinking.

The sap would hit a bump on Emma's smooth road when some young female admirer would approach Cholo and engage him in small talk about his wondrous whistling. A gentle "Help me to get this view" would sway the intruder away from this montage. The sap would come to a screeching halt if such a young interloper would share a phone number with Cholo. Emma was jealous of a paid service at first and slowly as a witness of someone engaging in an unbidden and unwelcome proxy gesture. The sap flow would resume with Cholo pointing to an excellent specimen, like a [yellow-backed oriole](#), known for its impressive vocal register, or motioning to her to come for a worthwhile picture. The pure sound of his whistling that has fascinated birds has also slowly begun to beguile her as a captive and captivated audience of one. How she wished she could whistle as well as he did!

Besides the aural pleasure, he consistently demonstrated good taste in choices, whether for food to eat, pose for shooting a picture, etc. She even began relying on his suggestions and started enjoying it. "You should make a day trip to this beautiful beach," he suggested to her. Although she was not exactly fond of such activity due to the swimmer's itch on and off, wearing a bathing suit with Cholo's eyes cast upon it seemed like a good offer. It occurred to her that he kept a professional distance per the rules. Annoying rules that get in the way of spontaneous fellowship at least and a downer against flirting.

She cashed in on the offer to go to the beach. She leaned on him to find a place to buy and pick a swimsuit model. She picked one that exposed plenty of skin. He kept a poker face and avoided making any comment about the choice. The following day, they did go to the beach. She could swim but didn't care much for it. She was clad in a skimpy cover with the essence of her breasts showing and her buttocks puckering out, barely layered by a *fillo dental*, a popular style. Cholo, on the other hand, had shorts, and his bare torso revealed well-defined muscles of the abdomen, thighs, and arms. He was not a good swimmer and had a fear of water. By necessity, they sat by the sea and conversed. Her physical appearance in this very sexy outfit made him get a quick and persistent erection, and he avoided looking at her in an attempt to control himself.

How he hated being in such a situation of torturing himself. However, duty came before pleasure; it was better to avoid mixing business with pleasure. He elaborated on his passion for birds and his old wish to work at an aviary. He avoided revealing much about his personal life other than to say he enjoyed working and was hellbent on helping his family. One would never guess his social success with the opposite sex. He refrained from asking questions about Emma's social status.

Nonetheless, she volunteered tidbits about her educational background, her desire to publish scientific papers about birds' behavior, shoot as many pictures as possible, and immerse herself in the local culture. Cholo ventured that he played the *tambor alegre* and usually participated in a music festival that featured regional instruments. "Oh my, I would love to see you play!" she blurted out. Emma's curiosity about Cholo was growing by the day. She definitely wanted to get closer to him and take matters into her own hands. They returned to the aviary the following day, and more of the same from the previous time occurred.

She wanted to thaw the ice, and at the end of a very productive day, when she binged on all aspects of birding, she tried to relax and be part of the human social scene. She experienced the

influence that watching mating rituals can have on our hormones. Instead of sitting in the rear of the car, she nonchalantly chose to use the front seat. “Would you be available to take me to a restaurant where locals eat and enjoy themselves this evening?” She asked him with a smile. Cholo hesitated for a minute and said, “I have to check with my boss and see if it’s ok.” He knew the answer would be yes, but he wanted to emphasize the correct etiquette.

He called someone on the phone and obtained the green light. “Why are you so formal? I am not going to bite you.” She laughed as she said it. Again, he acted differently because he usually talked about everything and was effusive. He was now measured. A bit confused, she said, “Qué tal? Why are you so quiet?” Cholo took the time to explain that he must follow the rules because once in the past, a guide became friendly with a customer, and things went sour; the customer blamed the agency. “I want to hold on to my job.” He said it in a matter-of-fact tone to emphasize that he meant business.

An awkward silence followed for a few minutes. It lasted long enough, and then he burst into laughter. “No, I know you won’t bite me. I must be careful.” Without missing a beat, the old Cholo started singing along, and whistling came back to the fore. They then talked about the nightlife, the good places to eat and to go to party. He made sure he only answered questions asked and didn’t venture to make any spontaneous suggestions. He was hedging his bet, not wanting to be accused later of *being fresh*. In a role reversal, Emma kept wishing he wouldn’t be so politically correct and be more adventurous. She could tell that he knew his way with women, but he was reticent to a fault.

Emma surprised herself by being the aggressive party. She couldn’t help it. The chemistry between the two of them just worked. She was beginning to nurse the opinion that *what happened in Colombia stays in Colombia*. She decided she would freshen up, and then one hour later, he could pick her up to show her around so she could sample the nightlife. When he came back to pick her up, she was wearing a dress with generous cleavage on the chest. He was wearing his customary jeans and tight-fitting polo shirt. The first stop was at an outdoor restaurant on a cobbled street. He motioned to her to go and would stay behind and fetch himself something to eat. “No, buster. You are my guest. It’s on the house. Come and help me choose some of the good dishes.”

Well, one thing led to another. After dinner, it was to a nightclub. Emma could have been a better dancer; initially, she struggled with the rhythm. Cholo became an on-the-spot dance instructor. She could passably tag along after a while in a combination of a good instructor and a good student, and she kept improving. She wanted to experience leisurely activities that have been off-limits by choice or happenstance. In her neighborhood while growing up, the idea of a party was mingling over wine and cheese and talking. Dancing was never part of her culture. Now that she had tasted it, she liked the pulse it generated. Cholo was having a ball and dancing to all the upbeat tunes. When a slow one started, he began heading to the table. Emma gently pulled him back and thrust herself against him, leaving very little distance because she had seen how people performed the slow ones. Cholo was hesitant because he knew what could happen; he didn’t readily want to go down that road, but the *chulo* part of him usually takes over in a tug-of-war game, and this was no exception.

Cholo introduced Emma to the *grind*. In this style of dancing, the two pubic bones come in close contact, the man’s phallus becomes erected, and the excitement begins its crest. Some claim there is no better way to start an intro into tantra on the way to the steamy satisfaction of Nirvana. Emma had an uninterrupted beat of her clit, and it felt wet and hot. She had a strange sensation in her throat, her nipples felt erect, and a slight drip of sweat was flowing from her nape. In the meantime, a steady heave in rapid succession from the chest gave her a flutter sensation,

like an accordion. The chest then devolved into a pit of burning charcoal fueling a locomotive avid of this energy, a true propulsive machine. The heat from the chest dissipated to the quivering lips, searching for gratification, and it spread to the skin, causing goosebumps. The friction of his penis against her clit was unbearably thrilling, and she maintained her body flush against his, ever so tighter. She ensconced her head against his neck, and her nares caught the whiff of his cologne, a subtle lime-based aroma. She was close enough to sense the orchestra's rhythm rehearsing in his chest at an accelerated pace as she came closer. Her receptive mood was in crescendo mode. She managed to efface any remaining space between the bodies. She was letting Cholo know in no uncertain way that she was aroused and enjoying it.

Cholo, for his part, was somewhat surprised about Emma's ease with the grind. He had noticed at first glance her revealing chest when he had picked her up and had an immediate hard-on that he had difficulty concealing. For the better part of the evening, the professional Cholo was reining in the real Cholo, sinner, carefree, true *chulo*. He knew the former was no match for the latter, but he had to try it and give himself cover, just in case. He could always claim that she voluntarily came on to him and that he was not the aggressor. But now that he was in the middle of a developing steamy scene, there would be no turning back. His hard-on was too stiff and needed relief. He slightly lowered his head enough to feel her breath and the lavender-laden fruity smell of her pores. His lips lightly touched her forehead, and he noticed the ripple that splayed through her body. She turned her head slightly upward, and her burning lips that had been in limbo saw daylight, and she entered the most pleasant alleyway that led to a smoocher. Emma discovered that Cholo's control of the muscles that make up the oral cavity was exceptional. She already knew about his vocal cords as she witnessed them in action several times. His lips were unique and could move back and forth between silky moderato to spicy allegro in caressing hers. His tongue moved by ebb and flow, alternating suck and release with a steady and subtle vibrato that resonated from the tits to the rosebud. This heat-generated and heat-consuming exchange signaled the prelude to absolute carnal pleasure. Emma had never met a kisser like Cholo before.

They danced three slow tunes, and then she whispered to his ear, "Please take me to my room." Obliging, he led her to the car. During the short trip to her hotel, he held the steering wheel with his left hand while the right one brushed her inner thighs lightly. His nimble fingers deftly and slowly reached her rosebud in a circular motion that sped up as the gyrations of her pelvis increased. She has a hypersensitive clit and can, under the right circumstance, have many orgasms in series. So far, she was experiencing her second one. The one on the dance floor made her knees buckle, and that's the time she asked him to take her home. She was in for a hot night, which has not happened in recent memory. When they reached her room, it took no time for her to disrobe and stay nude.

A horny Emma met her match in Cholo, now in full blossom and without restraint. She stepped into his territory, and now he was going to have fun. Cholo took his time to have Emma reach climax several times in a row by manual stimulation of the nub of the clit followed by a session of alternating sucking and fingering. He was working the nipples, clit, and vagina in a perfect storm for maximum, multipolar excitation while she was grunting, hissing, whimpering, screaming, body heaving, cursing, and begging for his penetration. When it took place, it was in the doggie position, with a condom on, with one finger gently rubbing a nipple and another massaging the clit. The rapid thrust sent her into a mind-blowing climactic region she had never reached. The size of his joystick and his ability to easily maneuver it to touch all the sensitive spots of the body of the clit contouring the vagina gave her paroxysmal pleasure. He also had the endurance of a dog, adding bliss to blessing. Having climaxed too many times to count, Emma

asked Cholo to relax on his back while performing her version of oral excitation. As a quick study, she mimicked his assertive movement of lips and tongue on his cock, bulging like a cannon. She experienced firsthand why *young women tended to flock to Cholo*.

Emma and Cholo did share quite a bit. What she discovered during the trip was a healthy appetite for both spicy food and steamy sex. The not-so-well-defined paradigm was the segue after this erotic night, she kept thinking as she was tossing and turning in bed quite a while after Cholo left. Who was he now? Her lover-cum-guide? The partner in a friendship with benefits? This was a completely new territory for her, both exciting and scary, for she knew not what the outcome would be. Would she be able to keep a waterproof seal between sexual desire and romantic feelings? She enjoyed every minute of the date and was feeling some additional heat in her rosebud thinking about it. Yet Cholo was too smart and witty to be dismissed as just a physical attraction. She was becoming apprehensive about falling into the trap of her creation while hoping that “a fling in Colombia can just be a passing fancy” with no strings attached. Nonetheless, she felt the urge to engage in sexting with Cholo and show him her bare chest and look at his nude, angular body and even masturbate while he was watching her. “You are crazy girl! What has gotten into you?” She pinched herself, “Calm down, don’t be silly.”

She fell asleep and woke up way past her usual 7 AM habit. Cholo was on the phone, “Good morning. You didn’t tell me if you needed me for today.” His voice had the usual upbeat tone, cheerful, bereft of any intimacy. A part of her wished he used the word “darling,” but her brain recoiled, “this is a professional relationship.” She liked the timbre of his voice and imagined for a brief moment the soothing sensation of such a male voice awakening her as a sign of caring. She so much wanted to tell him, “Why didn’t you stay last night and hold me in your arms, that felt good, you know?” Her pride overruled, “Gee, I had nothing specific in mind. Let’s go back to Palenque, this afternoon. Come to pick me up around noon.”

“I will be on time.” He replied without trying to make small talk, let alone veering into a sensual territory.

“Whoa? We had passionate sex last night, and he comes across as so dry you wouldn’t know the difference. That makes me feel cheapened.” A sting in the chest made her feel uncomfortable for a while. “Yes, Emma, don’t kid yourself; you do get attached to people quickly.” An inner voice reminded her. She thought this was a weakness buried in the past. She was finding out otherwise, and it left a bittersweet taste, far more bitter than sweet, truth be told. She couldn’t wait to see how Cholo would act later on.

Cholo, on the other hand, has had many encounters like last night and didn’t exactly pay too much mind to it. He had given her fair warning, but she came on to him strongly. He liked her all right, but that sensation didn’t amount to any romantic underpinning. He was hoping she was not nurturing any such feelings. That wouldn’t be good because it would get in the way of business. This disconnect did come to a fever pitch.

“Are you going to behave as if nothing happened between us yesterday? Did it have any meaning to you?” Emma asked him pointedly as she stepped into the car’s front seat, looking at him straight in the eyes, conveying a message fluid in meaning, between seething in anger and shame or remorse for being taken lightly. At the very least, she expected a more friendly attitude and not professional, if not robotic, efficiency.

“Well, I do like you, but I am now working as your guide and...” She didn’t let him finish the sentence and just took his hand, “There is no law that says we can’t be friends, and if we are friends, then behave as such. I am not asking for a commitment.” Cholo was not sure what to make

of this. His only concern was not to jeopardize his job. Emma was smart enough to understand his predicament, and she liked him enough not to create any fuss to embarrass him. Instead, she chose to take advantage of his assets to enhance her experience. She secured the position of friendship with benefits. She enjoyed his mind and his body in equal measure during the rest of her stay. She kept a fond memory of him and would sometimes wonder, “What if?”